

Book Reviews

1885 and After: Native Society in Transition edited by F. Laurie Barron and James B. Waldram. Regina: Canadian Plains Research Center, 1986. Pp. 306.

1885 and After: Native Society in Transition is not merely a record of changes that have taken place in Canada's native minorities in the west; it is also an interesting manifestation of a field of studies in a state of rapid growth within a society whose attitudes towards both Métis and Indians have themselves undergone a striking evolution. When I returned to Canada in 1949 and began to write on the way Canada had treated its minorities, particularly Doukhobors and Métis, I was astonished by the lack of authoritative and reliable material that was freely available. Stanley's *Birth of Western Canada* and Giraud's *Le Métis canadien* stood as rare monuments of scholarly writing on the history of the Métis (to which Stanley's book was not restricted); only three years later would Howard's more popular and tendentious *Strange Empire* appear. Nor was the climate of opinion regarding the Métis rebellions encouraging to those who cared to write about them except in a condemnatory vein. An article I wrote in *The Beaver* towards the end of the 1950s proposing in moderate tones a more understanding treatment of Riel and his actions aroused an angry correspondence of a kind it is impossible to envisage today. That Riel should become something of a Canadian hero and that special postage stamps should cast an aura of official approval over him and also Gabriel Dumont seemed then unthinkable.

The change in attitudes, scholarly and popular, is largely due to the emergence of militant native rights movements during the 1960s and 1970s. Without them there would not have been the rapid academic turning to native studies which has, among other results, produced the symposium I am reviewing. *1885 and After: Native Society in Transition* comprises nineteen papers presented at a conference with the same title as the book, held at the University of Saskatchewan to celebrate the centenary of the North-West Rebellion. The fact that the conference was held under the auspices of the university's Native Studies Department, and has been edited by two members of that department, is itself significant. Who, a few years ago, would have imagined such a discipline emerging in a Canadian university?

Yet the area of studies that was waiting to be opened — hitherto usually tacked on to anthropology since native peoples were regarded as having no history — was immense, and the richness of the present symposium is evidence of this, despite the fact that it virtually takes for granted the vast field of Indian and Métis cultures at their prime, in the days before the exhaustion of the buffalo herd and the 1885 rebellion. It is concerned with the rebellion itself, its causes and background, and with its consequences in determining the evolution of Métis and western Indian societies during the century that followed.

To the outside reader some of the perennial faults of a book based on a scholarly gathering will be evident. There is, particularly, an inclination to bow to academic fashion, to highlight some areas and unjustifiably lowlight others. The hypnotic presence of Riel is excessively evident, and so is the inclination to see the situation in 1885 from the viewpoint of Métis emigrants from Red River to the Saskatchewan and largely ignore the western Métis who had created working political organizations of their own, notably the St. Laurent commune of the early 1870s, well before the arrival of the Red River people. This in turn leads to an underestimation of the role of the western groups, with their lingering nomadic traditions, in precipitating the rebellion. There is, for example, no study of the way in which the extended family groups of the South Saskatchewan, such as the Dumonts and their associates by marriage, helped to determine events leading up to the rebellion and the course it took.

Some of the essays make particularly valuable and interesting contributions to our knowledge of the period, like Donald B. Smith's "Rip Van Jaxon," the account of the transformation of Will Jackson, Riel's anglophone secretary, into the "Métis" anarchist, Honoré Jaxon, and Diane Payment's essay on the changes in Batoche after 1885; contrary to the current myth, Payment shows, Batoche did not vanish after the defeat of the 1885 rebellion, but it did go through some interesting transformations.

Occasionally the pieces are self-laudatory, like George F.G. Stanley's "The Last Word on Louis Riel — The Man of Several Faces," though Stanley's genuine role as a pioneer in the field of native studies may perhaps be taken as a reason for indulgence. Other papers tend to be self-justificatory, like Thomas Flanagan's "Louis Riel: Was He Really Crazy?" Flanagan also takes part in a spirited exchange with Ken Hatt, who casts doubts on Flanagan's interpretation of the activities of the North-West Rebellion Scrip Commissions. Most of the papers are fluently and interestingly written, and one gets the feeling that people in native studies at least are shedding the appalling jargons that only a few years ago characterized academic writing in the social sciences. Perhaps the fact that they are really becoming historians as well as ethnologists is one explanation for their relatively clear prose.

Still, one regrets that, with the exception of a couple of native activists, the contributors to the symposium seem to have been entirely academic in their allegiances. The history of the Métis and of the Indians of the west has attracted a considerable number of Canadian creative writers and other artists, and the symposium — in both its spoken and its written form — might have been strengthened by the presence of literary artists like Rudy Wiebe and Margaret Laurence, then still active, like Mavor Moore and Don Gutteridge, and it might even have found an interesting role for Harry Somers, the composer of the opera, *Riel*. The discipline of native studies is such a new and as yet such an open one, that it could profit

from a cross-fertilization with the worlds of literature and the arts, from which it might receive a great deal in the way of imaginative interpretation and to which it might contribute a great deal in the way of valuable material.

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Perspectives of Women in the 1980s edited by Joan Turner and Lois Emery. Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 1984; *in the feminine: women and words/les femmes et les mots. Conference Proceedings 1983* edited by Ann Dybikowski, Victoria Freeman, Daphne Marlatt, Barbara Pulling and Betsy Warland. Edmonton: Longspoon Press, 1983.

The first women's conference I ever attended was in Calgary in 1975. The key speaker was Jill Conway, then Vice-President of the University of Toronto. She spoke of women's networks which at the time seemed a very new idea. But what most struck me was the appearance of the women delegates. So many were clones of leading feminists. I recall a (white) woman with an Afro hairdo who resembled Angela Davis; a Gloria Steinem look-alike with granny glasses and parallel streaks of white on dark hair; an Erica Jong who delivered her paper sitting atop the desk, one leg slung jauntily across the other. I thought how few models there were and how desperately needed even for strong, articulate, achieving women.

Since then, like most of us, I have become something of a veteran of these occasions. There was the "Twentieth Century Women Writers' Conference" at Hofstra University with a huge cast of writers and critics — Grace Paley, Elaine Showalter, Joyce Carol Oates and Marilyn French among them. There was "Feminist Criticism" at McMaster University with Carolyn Heilbrun and either (who knows? do they?) Gilbert or Gubar. There was a meeting of Saskatchewan women artists notable for a panel of articulate native women led by Maria Campbell. There was a meeting in Salt Lake City at which a number of Mormon women presented their special experiences.

I was at a conference on Texan women writers. This was organized as a reaction to an earlier one called "The Texas Tradition in Literature." At the earlier one the key speakers were men, with one female speaker imported from another country. Women writers from the state were relegated to either oblivion or brief spots on minor panels, and were understandably furious. The brochure for the conference was a dead giveaway with its array of symbols — ten-gallon hats, boots and spurs, lasso, branding iron and a rattlesnake! And the women protested as they did at the 1986 P.E.N. conference in New York.

I was reminded of that first Texas conference when I saw the brochure for the June 1987 Saskatchewan Literary Symposium at Fort San. As Yogi Berra said, "it's *déjà vu* all over again." When I asked two of the organizers